The Harvard Crimson

The University Daily Est. 1873

Editorials

Weatherheading the Storm

Martin Kramer's strategy for curbing extremism is repugnant, but not a call for genocide

By The Crimson Staff

February 25, 2010

Earlier this month, a visiting scholar at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs made a proposal that left the blogosphere up in arms. During a speech at the Herzliya Conference in Israel on Feb.3, Kramer argued that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency should cease providing the citizens of Gaza with what he deemed to be "pro-natal" aid (aid that "deliberately encourages births") to curtail its population's radicalization. In a clip posted on his blog, Kramer asserts that the subsidies currently offered by the UNRWA have caused the average age of Gaza's citizens to

remain remarkably low, thus creating an inordinately large youth population that can very easily turn to extremism. To facilitate a de-radicalization of Gaza, therefore, he asserts that the U.N. should cease providing its population with these subsidies. In response, numerous blogs and websites including, most notably, Electronic Intifada, have charged Kramer with promoting Palestinian genocide. While this claim appears baseless, the United Nations should flatly reject Kramer's advice on the grounds that it is both morally offensive and strategically inept.

Kramer's proposal is ethically unacceptable. The "pro-natal subsidies" that he recommends eliminating provide—by his own admission—guaranteed minimum standards of food and education for children. These are basic human rights, not luxuries offered by the UNRWA to encourage more births. To even call the subsidies "pro-natal" is extremely misleading, since the aid is clearly intended for children that already exist, rather than parents. Furthermore, even if the cessation of these subsidies would eventually normalize Gaza's population, which we do not believe to be true, this shift would not take effect for nearly decades after the aid's removal. Relying on a policy that works so slowly, when citizens of Gaza are suffering on a daily basis, is unthinkable—not to mention the Palestinians who could starve as a result.

On a practical level, Kramer's suggestion is also unwise. In an environment like Gaza, cutting off basic subsidies would inherently trap young Palestinians in a sphere of helplessness that makes violence all the more appealing. Propagating education and a decent standard of living is a much more effective method of curtailing extremism than attempting to

restrict the production of, as Kramer calls them, “superfluous young men.”

However, despite these concerns, the blogosphere clearly overreacted in perpetuating the genocide meme created by Electronic Intifada and others. While the 1948 U.N. Convention does delineate “measures intended to prevent births” as a form of genocide, Kramer was not advocating an ethnic cleansing of Gaza’s citizens, but rather a shift in the average age of their population with the intention of, in his opinion, benefiting them in the long run. Considering the content of Kramer’s speech, labeling his policy as “genocide” is unfair, and steers the debate away from his actual argument.

Although we disagree with Kramer’s politics, creating a thriving marketplace of ideas among academic Fellows at Harvard can only benefit the University as a whole. Indeed, a major goal of the Weatherhead Center is to promote “vigorous, sustained intellectual dialogue” within the Harvard community, and a diverse view like Kramer’s will certainly foster the sort of debate the center seeks to promote. Although we question Kramer’s judgment, we refrain from questioning his continued presence at the Center and the legality of his statement in light of the U.N. Convention on Genocide. We encourage the blogosphere to follow suit.